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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000179  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG AND IO/UNP

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TAGS: PREL PHUM PBTS UNSC AG WI MO

SUBJECT: MOROCCO HAS CONFIDENCE IN NEW UN WESTERN SAHARA  
ENVOY, BUT MORE NEEDED AMONG THE PARTIES

REF: A. ALGIERS 0191

¶B. RABAT 0172

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Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy Christopher Ross appears to have had a positive visit to Morocco, February 17-21. At a roundtable hosted by Charge, Ross outlined a flexible approach, as reported by Algiers (Ref. A) that seeks to build confidence between Morocco and the Polisario, before a fifth round in Manhasset, so that another failure did not undermine the credibility of the process. Local & friends8 diplomats doubted there could be much movement before the Algerian election, but this would be a good time to prepare. Partly through his linguistic facility and experience, Ross seems to have already some hearts and minds among the Moroccans, and he may have already won more confidence from the King than ever enjoyed by his predecessor. During a farewell outbrief on February 26, UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara head Julian Harston told Charge and other P-5 Chiefs of Mission that the current confidence-building measures are not building confidence among negotiators, that Algeria does not appear ready for a summit with Morocco, and that Moroccan respect for human rights in the territory appears to have declined in the last few weeks, an impression that we share. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Charge hosted a roundtable of diplomats/experts for the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy for Western Sahara Amb. Christopher Ross on February 19. The participants included UK Ambassador Tim Morris, Spanish DCM Alfonso Portabales, French PolCouns Frederic Clavier, Charge, A/DCM Millard and PolCouns. With Ross were UN Staffers Denise O'Brien (DPA) and Mikkel Brobold (DPKO) and UN Resident Representative Mourad Wahba.

¶3. (C) Ross opened by noting the warm welcome he had received since his arrival. Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi had hosted a dinner for him with all the heads of the major parties and several ministers. He also had met with Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri along with Director General for Studies and Documentation (DGED) (external intelligence chief) M. Yassine Mansouri and separately with Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa. He felt he had to overcome some Moroccan suspicion over his long years in Algeria.

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Need for more confidence  
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¶4. (C) Ross said the long wait for &confirmation8 had given him time to reflect. The Moroccans talk of consolidating past progress, but this seemed to refer just to certain key words, like realism. In fact, the four Manhasset rounds had produced no real progress. Another unproductive round could risk undermining the credibility of the process. He was suggesting a small, quiet meeting directly between Morocco and the Polisario, perhaps in Spain, to begin to discuss issues. He would not go to Mauritania because of the coup but had justified this to Nouakchott on logistical grounds.

¶5. (C) Ross added that he was also interested in enlarging the scope of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). The

existing UNHCR family exchange program was successful, but there needed to be more political confidence. He thought Morocco should renew the direct contacts with the Polisario in Rabat that took place many years ago under King Hassan II. One of the problems with the negotiations is that while the Polisario folks are the same, the Moroccan negotiators have changed; they no longer know each other. He had also suggested that Morocco either keep CORCAS head Kalihenna Ould er Rachid out of the talks or at least muzzle him. Polisario representatives maintained Kalihenna's role in the talks had been a provocation. Ross said he underscored to Fassi Fihri that, like it or not, Morocco had to remember that the other party in the talks was the Polisario. The goal must be to attract them to a political solution. There were many types of autonomy, including that of Iraqi Kurdistan. He solicited ideas for additional CBMs.

¶6. (C) Ross said his meeting with Interior Minister Benmoussa was upbeat. Benmoussa had briefed on Morocco's broader regionalization and decentralization plans, for which Sahara autonomy was just the leading edge. He urged Ross to convey that the autonomy offer is sincere, not just words.  
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¶7. (C) Ross said that in addition to working the Sahara issue, UNSYG Ban Ki Moon had charged him with attempting to improve relations between Morocco and Algeria. He planned to propose to Algeria a reinforcement of existing cooperation on security matters as well as working on other peripheral issues. He believed it was premature even to address the closure of the border. While human rights issues were important, they were not part of his mandate. He personally thought it was not sensible to include human rights in the MINURSO mandate, but perhaps there were other UN agencies that could take on the issue. Any approach would have to address conditions on both sides.

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Diplomats, Assessments

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¶8. (C) French Political Counselor Frederic Clavier said the situation was asymmetric between Morocco and the Polisario and the key was Algeria. In his view, the Moroccan public is heavily engaged, and a major setback on Western Sahara could hurt the country's stability. In Algeria, however, the issue was between Bouteflika and the generals, not the public. Clavier thought France could not accept any independent state that would not be able to secure its territory. He thought 2009 would be a year of transition due to the Algerian elections, and he anticipated no movement before 2010. He feared that Algeria would try to move discussions back to UNSCR resolution 1754 rather than the current 1813, with its focus on a political solution.

¶9. (C) British Ambassador Timothy Morris said Western Sahara was a concern for HMG, which is focused on iron-clad support for the SYG and only a cool approach to the autonomy proposal. UK interest is focused on the security question, and HMG was looking at ways to bring the GOM and Algeria together on this, as part of a broader Sahara/Sahel strategy.

¶10. (C) Spanish DCM Alphonso Portabales said the visit of the Spanish (de facto) Deputy Foreign Minister underscored Western Sahara's importance to Spain both as a security and political issue. Spain would be happy to support additional CBMs and host informal contacts, track two events or indirect CBM events. He noted a possible example could be the multiple varieties of autonomy exercised by the Spanish regions, including exercise of foreign relations and assistance. He noted some subtle progress on the diplomatic front. A flight from Rabat to Tindouf, as Ross would make on his Spanish-provided aircraft, would not have been possible two years before. He believed that the human rights issue was important, but Spanish information suggested conditions in Tindouf were no better than in the Western Sahara.

¶11. (C) Charge appreciated Ross's briefing and noted that the new U.S. administration had not refined its views on this issue but that USG support for the Secretary General's efforts to find a political solution would continue. It was important to consider views of the Sahrawis in the territory, not just those he would see in Tindouf. He urged Ross to visit the territory and meet, not only MINURSO, but a wide selection of the Sahrawi political spectrum. Moreover, the

Charge indicated that we believe the Moroccans could now improve their own position by creating more political space in the Western Sahara for organizations whose members were known Polisario sympathizers, and it would be useful for Ross to encourage the GOM. PolCouns added that a recent EU parliamentary delegation had been able to meet publicly with some of those dissidents, a small but important opening that could be expanded. This also could give the Personal Envoy a better measure of the extent of self-government the Sahrawis themselves desire.

¶12. (C) Ross got his bottom line from Morocco only on the following day when he met King Mohammed VI, as reported from Algiers (Ref A). Press coverage of the visit and his overall tour was largely upbeat. Ross met the Prime Minister in a traditional Moroccan jelleba and wore a Fassi shawl when meeting the King, eliciting a smile in the official photo. These touches, along with his use of Arabic in meetings and with the press were highly praised.

¶13. (C) In subsequent briefings for the Parliament and also with the press, a range of senior government officials praised Ross and underscored GOM determination to pursue the negotiations with Algeria and the Polisario.

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Harston,s Farewell  
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¶14. (C) On February 26, Ambassador Morris hosted a farewell coffee for P-5 Chiefs of Mission plus Spain with UN Special Representative for Western Sahara and MINURSO head Julian Harston, who is returning to Belgrade. Harston described his farewell calls on the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Interior as upbeat, and he said he felt that he was leaving MINURSO in better shape than he had inherited it two years ago. He declared that he has recommended that the UN reduce the size of the military contingent, given the fact that there are probably only 500 Polisario fighters on the eastern side of the berm in contrast with the 10,000 to 15,000 the Polisario claimed to have under arms. He noted that Morocco still maintains 60,000 to 80,000 troops in the territory.

¶15. (C) The Russian Ambassador asked if MINURSO,s name should be changed since a referendum appears unlikely, and Harston responded that he thought that would be more trouble than it was worth and that to his knowledge UN peacekeeping operations never changed names -) even if the mission changed. Harston opined that Algeria holds the key to a settlement. A summit followed by meetings of experts could be a good format, but Algeria is not ready for a summit. Harston also said that the CBMs are useful for the Sahrawis, but they are not building confidence among the negotiators and, thus, are not advancing peace. As for human rights, Harston felt that respect has declined since the change of Walis in January. Finally, he said he believed that an independent Western Sahara is unrealistic because the territory has no real economy, and the limited fishing and tourism along with fruit and phosphate production offer little for a viable state.

¶16. (C) Comment: Harston is leaving on better terms with the GOM than he enjoyed during his tenure. Ross,s linguistic skills and cultural sensitivity appear to have helped win the hearts and minds of the Moroccans, and overcome their residual suspicions-based on his spending far more time in Algeria than here. Both in senior officials, public pronouncements and the Foreign Minister,s private comments to Charge, the Moroccans seem to be giving a bit more acknowledgment to a role for the Polisario than in the recent past. That subtle shift, along with the message from the King (reported reftels) suggests that Ross is already having an impact, at least from the Moroccan perspective. He does seem to have won more confidence from King Mohammed VI than was ever enjoyed by his predecessor, Peter Van Walsum. The UNSYG seems to have done well in choosing a regional specialist for this role. We hope that he will do as well in choosing Harston,s replacement. End comment.

¶17. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.

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